RIDICULE, *so far as it affects Religion, Consider'd and Censur'd.*

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A

SERMON

Preached before the

UNIVERSITY

OF

OXFORD,

At St. *MARY*'s,

On SUNDAY, *Decemb.* 8. 1734.

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BRITISH MUSEUM

2 Pet. III. 3.

Knowing this firſt, that there ſhall come in the laſt days Scoffers.

IT would be a great point gained in the cauſe of Truth, if we could once perſuade Men to reaſon calmly and diſpaſſionately about it; if they could be brought to debate on things ſerious in a ſerious manner, and to govern all their enquiries in matters of an allowed importance, by the rules of Decency and Sobriety. No man that is a real friend to Religion, can be willing to oppoſe a Rational examination into the Truth of any Opinions or Doctrines, that come recommended to us by the Authority of ſo venerable a Name; not only becauſe This would be an impregnable ſecurity to Error where it had ever taken poſſeſſion, but becauſe the intereſt of Truth itſelf muſt be injured by it; which may give room for Suſpicion, when it declines a Scrutiny, but will, like Gold in the furnace, retain all its weight and purity in the trial, and ſhine even with a greater luſtre for the ſeverity of it. But then likewiſe every Man who profeſſes himſelf to be a free Enquirer into Religious concerns, ſhould bring with him a Mind duly diſciplin'd to render his enquiries Succeſsful. Having laid in a proper ſtore of previous knowledge to inform his Un-

derſtanding, He muſt be ſatisfied of the vaſt importance of the matters he is about to take into conſideration; He muſt approach them with modeſty and reverence, examine them with meekneſs and ſincerity, and judge of them with impartiality. Thoſe who are already ſettled in true Religious Principles would not long be at Variance with ſuch a diſpoſition as this. But it is one thing, to convince Men who delight in Inſtruction, and another, to prepare Men to be capable of Conviction. This is a task of difficulty and labour indeed. For whilſt a Levity of mind, an affectation of Novelty, an undiſtinguiſhing averſion to Superſtition, the ſelf-ſufficiency of Ignorance or ſuperficial enquiry, the prevalence of Faſhion, or contagion of evil Acquaintance, and above all, ſtrong Prejudice in favour of vicious habits, determine Men ſeverally againſt the Doctrines and Duties of our holy Religion, How ſhall we go about to explain or enforce either the one or the other? In vain to ſuch Unbelievers do we oppoſe the ſtrength of Reaſon and argument, when They loſe all their force merely becauſe they are Advocates for Religion; whilſt for the ſame reaſon, every little plauſible plea that can be urged in favour of Infidelity is careſs'd as a Demonſtration. And to aggravate the misfortune, Theſe are a generation ſo wiſe in their own Eyes, that as they will not give ear to admonition, ſo neither will they be prevail'd upon to be ſilent; Obſtinate in Error, they labour for Proſelytes to it; like the deaf Adder, they will not hear the voice of the Charmer, and the poiſon of it is

under

under their lips. It is notwitſtanding *Our* Duty, with whatever ſucceſs it may be attended, to perſevere in recommending the intereſts of Chriſt and his Religion, by the force of our Doctrine, and by the example of our Lives: And eſpecially it behoves us, ſince we place the ſucceſs of our Cauſe upon the Truth of it, that we neither defend it ourſelves in ſuch a manner as to weaken it, nor ſuffer our Adverſaries to overthrow it by Subtlety and ſtratagem; and that, as we may be ſure, they can be furniſh'd with no arguments againſt us from right Reaſon, ſo we ſuffer them not, without detection, to ſubſtitute fallacies in their room.

It falls not within my preſent deſign, to enumerate or diſtinguiſh by their ſeveral kinds all the Arts of falſe Reaſoning by which They pervert the judgement of Mankind; ſeduce the illiterate and unwary; and even ſometimes perplex the diligent and more learn'd Enquirer. As Sophiſtry is their Science, it muſt be own'd that ſome of them are great proficients in it, and can furniſh out Examples to every Rule. But my Text confines me to the conſideration of a particular Artifice, which, tho' it has little to do with Reaſon, and rarely with the appearance of it, has perhaps done more miſchief in general to true Religion, than every other Craft beſide; I mean that of *Mockery* and *Ridicule*. And I am ſupported in this aſſertion by an Author of great Name, who, tho' he has loudly declared himſelf an Advocate for the free uſe of them upon all ſubjects, yet ſeems to think, that if they had but been ſeaſonably applied, they might

have cruſh'd Chriſtianity in its Infancy. "He "never heard that the Antient Heathens (tho' "the Irreligious part of them had long before "tried the ſame method, unſucceſsfully it ſeems, "againſt ſome of their own Philoſophers) were "ſo well adviſ'd in their ill purpoſe of ſuppreſ-"ſing the Chriſtian Religion in its firſt riſe, as "to make uſe at any time of what he calls a Bar-"tlemew-Fair Method; But this he is perſuaded "of, that had the truth of the Goſpel been any "way ſurmountable, they would have bid much "fairer for the ſilencing it, if they had choſe to "bring our Primitive founders upon the ſtage in "a pleaſanter way than that of Bear-skins and "Pitch-barrels; and he is apt to think, that if "the Jews had tried their wit and malice this "way againſt our Saviour and his Apoſtles, they "might poſſibly have done our Religion more "harm than by all their other ways of Severi-"ty [a]." Now tho' we know that Chriſtianity is built upon a ſure foundation which can never be remov'd, and accordingly has from the beginning ſurmounted the united efforts of Mockery and Perſecution, (as Chriſt himſelf was cloath'd with a robe of Purple, and hail'd as a Mock-King, before he was led to his Crucifixion; and as the Apoſtles of Chriſt were expoſed to the Deriſion as well as to the Cruelty of their Enemies) yet ſo far we muſt agree, that nothing has done or can do our Religion greater harm than *Ridicule*, in totally ſubverting the Faith of many, and weakening that of more. A perſuaſion of the truth of this remark will be apt to make

[a] Characteriſtics. Lr. concerning Enthuſiaſm. p. 29, &c.

us ſtartle a little at another of the ſame Authors, which is not eaſily to be reconciled with this, and may deſerve to be taken into Conſideration. For in another place he would have "Ridicule "to be the proper Teſt of what is Serious, as "Gravity is of Ridicule; becauſe a Subject that "will not bear Raillery is ſuſpicious, juſt as a "jeſt that will not bear a Serious examination is "falſe Wit[a]. The reaſon of this he had given us before. "For that, ſays he, which can be ſhewn "only in a certain light is queſtionable. Truth, "'tis ſuppoſed, may bear all lights; and one of "thoſe principal lights or natural mediums by "which things are to be view'd in order to a "through recognition is Ridicule itſelf, which "he calls *that manner of proof*, by which we diſ-"cern whatever is liable to juſt raillery in any "Subject[b]." The Inſinuation deſigned is obvious, that true Religion can never ſuffer by this method, tho' Impoſture may. Now foraſmuch as *Ridicule* is here repreſented in ſuch a light as to render it upon all occaſions not only innocent but laudable, as being a Sure guide to lead us to the knowledge of the Truth, and a never-failing Teſt to try the worth of every principle and opinion; and becauſe an Acquieſcence in this notion may be attended with very fatal conſequences, (even where the *Ridicule* is as *genteel* as this Author pleaſes; a quality that may in Some caſes render it even more dangerous, as it engages the favour of Mankind to whatever it accompanies.) I ſhall endeavour in the remaining part of my Diſcourſe to ſhew

[a] Characteriſtics. Eſſay on the freedom of Wit &c. p.74. [b] Ib. p.61.

I. That

I. That an Inclination to *Ridicule* is apt to lead Men off from any Serious enquiries at all: That it cannot in itſelf avail to the Diſcovery or the Trial of Religious Truths: and that the Practiſe of it is neither a proper nor effectual method to promote the intereſt of them.

II. I ſhall obſerve how thoſe who pretend moſt to this Talent of *Ridicule* do in reality employ it; and ſhall expoſtulate with them a little upon their Conduct.

III. In order to render this diſcourſe more uſeful, I ſhall briefly recommend ſome means of ſecuring Our Religion and Ourſelves againſt any Attacks that may come from this Quarter.

I. If, as I have laid down in my firſt Obſervation, a fondneſs for *Ridicule* is apt to lead Men off from any Serious enquiries at all, it will follow, that we ought to be cautious how we indulge ourſelves in a propenſity or inclination to it; becauſe allowing that it might be of Service if properly applied, yet in all likelyhood we never ſhall make that right application. And that the foregoing obſervation is juſt, Experience will teach us, and Reaſon may account for what Experience teaches us to be true.

For whatever Qualities may be neceſſary to furniſh Men with a Talent for *Ridicule*, yet we ſhall almoſt univerſally find a Levity of mind to be the main Spring that ſets it in Action, as it diſpoſes them to Merriment and to treat every thing

thing ludicrouſly that falls in their way. And accordingly we may obſerve, that what thoſe, who are eminent in this Character, ſeek after and labour for, is only ſomething to be witty upon; and ſo fond are they of ſhewing their abilities at a jeſt, that whenever it occurs, they throw it out in Seaſon, or out of Seaſon; at Friends, at Religion, and on the moſt Solemn occaſions. Nor indeed is it to be preſumed, that Men bigotted to this kind of Wit will ever loſe an opportunity of exerting it; or that they will be reſtrain'd in what they ſay to Propriety and Decency, when Sprightlineſs and Humour is all that they aim at. It is evident that Men of this turn muſt be impatient, if not incapable, of cool and ſedate reflection, and muſt have a frame of ſpirit oppoſite to every thing that is grave and manly. They can be no more inclined to, than they are qualified for, ſober enquiries. For how ſhould They, think we, perplex themſelves with abſtracted reaſonings, with examination of firſt Principles, and purſue a tedious deſtruction of conſequences from them, in order to ſettle (what they are in no care to have at all ſettled) their Thoughts? It is likely that Theſe ſhould give themſelves the pain of long and laborious reſearches, which the preverſe diſputings of Men have in many caſes made neceſſary for the diſentangling of Truth, whoſe Profeſſion is only to make themſelves Sport? Or is it probable, that they ſhould concern themſelves to any uſeful purpoſe with the more obvious Duties of Religion, which carries too grave an aſpect to recommend itſelf to ſuch an acquaintance, which

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condemns all fooliſh jeſting, and is itſelf the moſt ſerious thing in the world?

Indeed that Men of this turn ſhould have made ſome ſuperficial enquiries into Religious matters, and that by a ſlender application they ſhould have furniſh'd themſelves with a kind of Skill wherein, which is worſe than Ignorance, namely, that of raiſing doubts and difficulties without knowing, or caring for, a Solution, is as readily to be accounted for as admitted: Becauſe hence is raiſed their laſting fund for *Ridicule*, without which they would have but few opportunities of diſplaying their Talent. For as true *Ridicule* ſhould be level'd at things really and nothing more than abſurd, ſuch as are fit to excite no other paſſion than the bare Deriſion of Mankind, ſo we ſhall find it to be a work of too delicate and ſubtle a ſpirit, to be perform'd by every Pretender to it: Whereas there is a kind of it that is open to the moſt bungling capacity, which conſiſts entirely in miſrepreſenting by a ludicrous manner things truly ſerious and ſolemn. And the more they are ſo, the more is the *Ridicule* height'ned by it; as Perſons are the more expos'd by an Antick repreſentation in proportion to the gravity of their Characters. Thus will a fondneſs for *Ridicule* in all probability prevent Men from entring at all into any enquiries relating to Religious matters, any further than as they will furniſh materials to them for the Exerciſe of their Wit.

But ſuppoſing that it was poſſible for Men of this trivial and fantaſtical frame of mind to buſy themſelves in earneſt in an enquiry into Reli-

gious

gious Opinions and Doctrines in order to think aright, and to act agreeably to a deliberate judgement; yet I muſt further obſerve, that their Talent of *Ridicule* would not in the leaſt avail them in this caſe, either as an Aſſiſtant in the Purſuit, or as a Criterion for the Trial, of the Truth. This will effectually appear from the Nature of Truth itſelf, and the means which That will neceſſarily point out for the attainment of it. Now Truth, as far as human Underſtanding is the Subject of it, "conſiſts in the Perception of the Vi-"ſible or Probable agreement or diſagreement of "Ideas, as they are affirmed or denied one of an-"other[a]." It is evident that in order to this perception, Judgement is the moſt uſeful faculty of the Mind, which is that of diſcerning and diſtinguiſhing between the ſeveral Ideas it has. Without this, all our Thinking would be nothing but confuſion, and upon it depends the Evidence and Certainty of every Truth which the Mind of Man can, by the Aſſiſtance of its own powers, attain to. And the nicety and exactneſs of Judgement conſiſts in accurately ſeparating one from another Ideas wherein can be found the leaſt difference, thereby to avoid being miſled by Similitude, and by Affinity to take one thing for another. Whatever therefore tends to diſturb, to pervert, or to embaraſs this Faculty, muſt in proportion render us leſs capable of attaining to, or diſcerning the Truth. That *Ridicule* has ſuch a tendency, the very Nature of it will inform us. For as it is properly that Species of Wit, which aims to expoſe things to

[a] Locke. Conduct of the Underſtanding §. 41.

Laughter by a fantaſtical and ludicrous repreſentation of them, it will ſo far appear to partake of the nature of Wit[a] in general, as to lie rather in putting together, in order to pleaſe and to ſurprize, Ideas wherein can be found any diſtant Reſemblance or Congruity, than in a Careful obſervation wherein they differ; and whilſt the great Aim of it is to form burleſque Pictures rather than true Images in the Mind, and it muſt of conſequence be more Sollicitous to divert the Imagination than to inſtruct the Underſtanding, we ſhall find that for once that it will lead us to the knowledge of Truth, it will a thouſand times miſguide us. Nay in ſome particular inſtances *Ridicule* may not only probably, but muſt neceſſarily lead us from a right Notion of things, namely whenever it intermeddles with any Doctrines of Religion, that ſhould happen to be agreeable to Truth; altho' it is pretended, that *theſe* can poſſibly receive no prejudice from it. For as it is the End of *Ridicule* to expoſe things to Laughter and deriſion, and as truly Religious matters have not any thing in them that is *liable* to this Sort of treatment, ſo they muſt neceſſarily be diſguiſed and miſrepreſented by falſe colours, before they can in any degree be *capable* of it. Where then will be the poſſibility of knowing and diſtinguiſhing the Truth, when it ſhall ſo reſemble Error, that we ſhall be no longer able to delineate the genuine features of it? or how can That be an Aſſiſtant towards the diſcovery of it, which is the very thing that puts it on the Mask?

[a] Locke. Eſſay. B. 2. Ch. 11. §. 2.

But

But further: Neither is *Ridicule* at all a better *Criterion* for the Trial of Truth, than it is an *Aſſiſtant* to us in the Purſuit of it. It is by no means proving it to be ſo, by aſſerting that Truth is to be tried by *Ridicule*, becauſe it never can prevail againſt the Truth; that if it be wrong placed, it will recoil upon itſelf, and be its own Corrector in the End; and that mocking at things truly ſerious and venerable, fixes a reproach upon the Underſtanding of him only that attempts it. For tho' we know that Truth will ſo far prevail, as to be incapable of being made falſe by any Artifices whatſoever, yet may it not by being ridiculed appear to be ſo, and loſe much of that good Effect which it might otherwiſe have produc'd? and may not a haſty determination be made to the prejudice of it, before the *Ridicule* is diſcern'd to be falſe? Nay may not Perſecution, or any other the moſt injurious treatment of Religion, be as well recommended upon this Principle for the trial of Truth, *Becauſe in the End it will be ſuperior to them all?* And tho' we allow that a Man may by a miſapplication of his Wit, make himſelf truly ridiculous to thoſe who have juſt notions of things; yet we muſt be ſenſible that the generality of Men are not competent judges, whether it be exerciſed unſeaſonably or duly; nor are they able truly to diſtinguiſh between what falls under *Ridicule*, and what really deſerves to do ſo. And I would ask even Thoſe, who are capable of weighing things in an equal balance, and of making juſt and equitable determinations, how it is that They themſelves can tell, whether *Ridicule* is pointed at its

proper object, or not. Can it be known any otherwiſe than by the cool deliberation of the Underſtanding, which muſt take things as they are in themſelves under Examination, and conclude from a judicious enquiry into the true Nature of them, whether they deſerve to be treated ludicrouſly or no? Or can they juſtifie even to themſelves their Raillery of any thing, till they have by Reaſon and Reflection firſt ſatisfied themſelves that it is irrational and abſurd? Now what kind of a Teſt that is, which muſt itſelf be tried by another Criterion, namely that of *ſtrict Reaſon* before it can be admitted as ſuch, when this latter is capable of anſwering every purpoſe much better without it; and how Uſeleſs ſuch a Rule muſt be to meaſure Religious Truth by, I ſhall leave to the determination of every ſerious and unprejudiced Mind.

But the moſt ſpecious plea of all in behalf of this practiſe is yet behind, and which carries the greater weight with it becauſe it has ſometimes been eſpouſed by thoſe who have been indiſputably friends to the Cauſe of Virtue and Religion. It has been urged, that tho' *Ridicule* is in no wiſe to be propoſed as a Guide to conduct us to the knowledge of Religious truths, or as a Standard to prove them by, yet when they are once eſtabliſhed upon their proper foundation, and have approved themſelves to our calm and deliberate judgement, that then it may be of conſiderable Service, both in the Defence and Recommendation of them: That it may be prevalent to ſilence unreaſonable Oppoſition; to keep true Piety in countenance, and to make Irreli-

religion aſhamed. That *that* weapon may be ſucceſsfully employed on the Righteous ſide, which has ſo often fought the battles of Profaneneſs and Infidelity; or to make uſe of an ingenious Alluſion, That it is truly uſeful and good ſo long as it retains "the Nature of that Salt to which it "is uſually compared, which preſerves and keeps "ſweet the good and the ſound parts of all bo-"dies, and only frets, dries up, and deſtroys "thoſe humours which putrifie and corrupt [a].

It is not becauſe I would deprive Religion of any aid whatſoever that can contribute to the Security of it, but becauſe I would have no Auxiliaries called in to its aſſiſtance, whoſe fidelity and ſervices are queſtionable, that I proceed notwithſtanding to obſerve, that *Ridicule* is neither a proper nor effectual Method to promote the real Intereſt of Religion.

As for the Gainſayers, it is in vain to think of ſilencing Them by Retaliation of Raillery; who then only are enabled to oppoſe the Truth with Succeſs, when the Trial of it is put upon a wrong iſſue: It never can be effectually done but by ſerious Argumentation propoſed in the ſpirit of Meekneſs and Charity. The former alone will ſecure our Cauſe, and the latter will contribute much to win over our Adverſaries. Whilſt we rely upon ſtrict Reaſoning only, we ſecure to ourſelves a ſure Foundation; and a ſoft Anſwer is a Recommendation to others of the Reaſonings it contains. Whereas there is an Acrimony in *Ridicule*, which will exaſperate rather than reclaim Men, and make them incapable

[a] Sprat. Hiſt. of the Royal Soc. p. 419.

of

of receiving the Truth by prejudicing them againſt it; and Ourſelves it will be apt to delude by ſetting up falſe lights, and may give our Adverſaries an advantage over us by leading us out of the way.

Much leſs ſhould *Ridicule* intrude itſelf into matters of Controverſy betwixt Chriſtians themſelves; as it ſeems to carry in it a Spirit directly Contrary to that of the Religion they profeſs; as it lays both Parties open to the Scoffs of their common Enemies; and as it can only ſhew at laſt, not which has the moſt righteous Cauſe, but which has the keeneſt Pen. Experience may teach us ſome of the miſchiefs of this practiſe: For Inſtances may be given wherein Men have ſet out in a ſerious diſpute on matters of importance, and have ſeem'd to promiſe much ſucceſs therein from their debates, while they were confined to Argument and directed by Moderation; till, *Raillery* and *Ridicule* having ſupplanted *Reaſoning*, the point in queſtion was no longer in view; what was before a friendly conteſt for the truth, became a ſpiteful trial of wit, and from a difference of Opinion grew an irreconcileable hatred in the Heart. So much more likely is *Ridicule* to perpetuate Quarrels, than to decide a Diſpute.

If upon any Religious occaſions *Ridicule* ſeems to be allowable, it muſt be with regard to ſuch Opinions, as are *evidently* erroneous; ſuch eſpecially as are ſo big with abſurdities and ſo contradictory to common Senſe, that it ſeems below the dignity of Reaſon to undertake the Refutation of them. And yet of what ſervice can it be even

even in this caſe? Whatever gave birth to ſuch Monſters, it is plain that ſtrong Prejudice alone keeps them alive; which even impreſſes on them a Sacred Character. To endeavour to laugh Men out of ſuch prejudices, is to confirm them the more in them; as their Converſion is never likely to be brought about by ſuch means as muſt inſpire them with horror. Rather let Kindneſs and Perſuaſion remove the prejudice, and then the Error will be diſpell'd of courſe.

Neither is *Ridicule* at all fit to be truſted as proper to promote the *Practiſe* of Religion and Virtue by endeavouring to put *Vice and Immorality* out of Countenance. Theſe, I fear, are not of ſo modeſt a Nature as to be capable of Bluſhing: And if Arguments of a more ſublime kind, and ſuch as are drawn from nobler Motives will not prevail againſt them, they are not to be vanquiſh'd by being laught at. The Obligation we are under to conform to the Will of God, which is the foundation of Duty; the Eſſential and Eternal differences of things, which conſtitute Virtue and Vice; the Conformity of the one, and the Diſagreement of the other, to our Nature; and the Improvement or Debaſement of it conſequent upon our different choice of Acting; are the true Motives to influence and determine a Rational creature. The Love of God to Mankind, and his Abhorrence of wickedneſs, exhibited in the Myſtery of our Redemption; The Precepts, the Example, and the Sufferings of our bleſſed Lord and Maſter; the Life and Immortality which He has reveal'd; The gracious Promiſes of the Goſpel to allure Men to goodneſs;

and

and the dreadful Judgements denounced againſt the Obſtinately profane, are ſtill more forcible Motives to perſuade and to animate a Chriſtian. If Mens minds are ſteeled againſt receiving any impreſſion from ſuch Topics as theſe, it is even a kind of Preſumption to expect it from *Ridicule*; which beſides we are not authorized to make Uſe of, either by [a] Revelation or by Reaſon. It was not the Practiſe of Chriſt and his Apoſtles to make a jeſt of Mens Vices; but they diſcountenanced all ſuch behaviour, as much as might be, both by their doctrine and by their Examples. Even *Solomon* himſelf, who inſiſts ſo much upon the *Folly of Wickedneſs*, does not treat it ludicrouſly as for his diverſion, but ſpeaks of it as a Folly more apt to move Melancholy than Mirth, even as the Folly of Fooliſhneſs and

a I am Senſible that many Learned and Serious Men have thought the Uſe of Ridicule might be juſtified by the Example of the Sacred Writers. In Support of this Opinion the following paſſages of Scripture have been produced by Mr. Barbeyrac in particular, in his Treatiſe *De la Morale des Peres. Ch.* 13, in oppoſition to the contrary Sentiments of St. Ambroſe; viz. 1 *Kings* 18. 27. 1 *Cor.* 4. 8. *&c.* 2 *Cor.* 12. 13. *Gen.* 3. 22. *Mat.* 26. 40, 45. *Mar.* 7. 9. For my part I cannot diſcover the *Ridicule* in any of theſe Texts, or any thing that betrays a jocular Diſpoſition in the Speaker, or that is deſigned to excite Laughter in the Hearer. The firſt he himſelf calls very properly a *Sarcaſm*; in which Elijah's Zeal for the honour of the true God ſhews itſelf in a contemptuous but ſevere Inſult upon the lifeleſs Baal and his devoted Prieſts. If the Prophet has a Smile upon his Face, it is the Smile of Indignation and Vengeance. In the two following paſſages there may be what the Latins call *Urbanitas*, but nothing of what they call *Irriſio*. *Vide Aquin. Summ. Theol.* 2da. 2dæ. *Qu* 75. Neither St. Ambroſe's Authority, which ſeems inconſiſtent with itſelf, nor any other will juſtifie the Interpretation of *Gen.* 3. 22. Of the two laſt Texts, the former contains a tender and compaſſionate Rebuke; the latter has in it a mere mode of Expreſſion in the Greek Language, often uſed by the beſt Writers, where there is not the leaſt deſign of an Ironical Sneer.

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Madneſs. And Reaſon itſelf may likewiſe inform us, that nothing is ſo likely to leſſen the natural Veneration and Awe in Men, with which the Conſideration of Religious matters is attended, and upon which in a great meaſure depends the good Effect they are likely to produce in the Mind, as a light and ludicrous treatment of them. Men will be apt to think that things cannot be of any mighty Conſequence, which, even Thoſe who recommend them, make ſo free with-all themſelves; and that neither Danger nor Death is at hand, where Thoſe that denounce them are themſelves in Sport.

Is *Ridicule* then of no real uſe at all? and is it abſolutely to be baniſh'd out of the World? To aſſert this would ſeem too ſevere perhaps to thoſe, who think they have a Talent for it. But ſo long as it is left in full poſſeſſion of every Folly, of every Abſurdity and Extravagance in Life; in ſhort, of all things that are *Blemiſhes* in human Conduct, rather than *Vices*, the Advocates for it will have no reaſon to complain that it will ever want employment. And tho' I have been labouring to exclude it from all concerns of Religion, even where it offers its aſſiſtance and friendſhip, yet I have not done it by repreſenting it in this laſt caſe as a thing *Criminal* ſo much as *Imprudent* to admit of it: neither do I accuſe thoſe who are for enliſting it in the Service of Religion of any treacherous deſigns, but have only offer'd my reaſons why I diſapprove of their judgement.

And if from the foregoing conſiderations it ſhall appear, that *Ridicule* is not even fit to be

allowed of in the ſupport of Religion, how ſtrong muſt be the Concluſiion, that it never ſhould be employ'd to the Deſtruction of it? If it ſtands in need of Excuſe even in a good Man and in a good Cauſe; how utterly unpardonable muſt it be, when uſed by bad Men to bad purpoſes? For it is not to be expected that the Pleaſantry of Wickedneſs ſhould take away the Malignity of it, or that Wit ſhould atone for Sin. And yet that there is a daring Tribe of Men, that declare open war with it againſt every thing that is ſacred, it is now time to ſhew under my ſecond general head, where I am

II. To obſerve, how thoſe who pretend moſt to this Talent of *Ridicule* do in reality employ it, and to expoſtulate with them a little upon their conduct.

The firſt ſort of Men that fall under our Notice are thoſe who ſhoot out their arrows againſt all Religion in general; who have no juſt notions of God and his Attributes; deny or diſregard his Providence; confound all diſtinctions of Moral good and evil; and have no Senſe at all of the Dignity of human Nature. Theſe having, as they call it, *enlarged* their thoughts, and being under no manner of reſtraint from Principles, look down with pity and contempt upon thoſe who are ſtill ſhackled with them, and have not thrown off all regard to Reaſon and Conſcience. How do theſe Men of unlimited freedom make diverſion with Slaves who own themſelves to be under inſpection, and accountable for their actions! It is matter to them of endleſs

leſs deriſion, that We, who are but a better kind of Brutes, ſhould pay ſuch homage to Virtue, as to renounce the pleaſures of the World, and often ſubject ourſelves to preſent cares and inconveniences for the ſake of it, when all that we can propoſe to Ourſelves is a precarious Expectancy in Reverſion; much more, when this Idol Virtue that we fall down before, is nothing but a Phantome, the creature of our own fooliſh imaginations; or at beſt depends only upon Cuſtom, and the arbitrary Conſtitution of human Laws. And accordingly there is not a ſingle Moral Virtue, which they would not banter out of the World, by miſcalling it by ſome reproachful Name. If we ſhew Zeal for the honour of God, they will mock at our Enthuſiaſm; if we worſhip and fear him, at our Superſtition. Whatever Generous things have been done for the welfare of Mankind, will meet with no better a Name, than that of Folly or Vanity or Deſign; and all Private goodneſs will be expoſed by them as Grimace, Hypocriſie, and Preciſeneſs. In a word, "*Whatſoever things are true, and honeſt,* "*and juſt, and pure, and lovely, and of good re-*"*port, if there be any Virtue, if there be any* "*Praiſe*; theſe things they make the conſtant "ſubject of their mockery and abuſe, Ridicule "and raillery. On the contrary, whatever things "are profane and impure and vile and diſho-"nourable, theſe things they are induſtrious to "repreſent as harmleſs and indifferent, and to "laugh Men out of their natural ſhame and ab-"horrence of them; nay even to recommend "them with their utmoſt Wit."

If theſe Men could be ſuppoſed capable of ſober Reflection, I would expoſtulate with them in the following manner. What, (in the Name of all that's ſacred!) is there *Ridiculous* in the belief of a ſupreme, infinite, intelligent Mind, the Creator and Governour of the Univerſe? Is it not moſt abſurd and fooliſh to ſuppoſe the Contrary, if we will but reflect upon the vaſtneſs and regularity and exactneſs of this beautiful Syſtem? And may not the ſurprizing Harmony continually preſerved in all the parts of it, very reaſonably perſuade us, that the great Author of it ſtill holds it together by his Providence, keeping it uniformly in Subjection to the Laws he at firſt preſcribed? What is there ludicrous in ſuppoſing alſo this Being to be juſt and holy and good, and therefore the ſame God of Order in the Moral world as he is in the Natural? That for that reaſon, he created Man with an excellent Underſtanding to diſcern Good from Evil; and with Freedom of Will, to make him capable, according to his behaviour, of Reward or Puniſhment? Can it excite any but the Laughter of Fools, when we place the excellency of Mans nature in his Rational faculties, and the juſtneſs of his Conduct in the regulation of it by Reaſon? What Folly is there in ſubmitting ourſelves to that which was given us for our Guide and Inſtructor? Or how can we find any thing *Ridiculous* in thoſe Actions, which our Governing Principle not only approves of but commands? Is there any thing weak or extravagant in the Reverence and Love of God, in Submiſſion to his Government, in celebrating his

his Perfections, and acknowledging our conſtant dependence upon his Providence? Juſtice and Probity and Integrity and Benevolence towards Men, have likewiſe nothing in them that deſerves to be laugh'd at, but on the contrary, both from the Reaſonableneſs and the Uſefulneſs of them are truly valuable. Temperance, Sobriety, and Chaſtity, tho' they are common ſubjects of deriſion, are upon every account to be embraced, and have at all times been held in eſteem by Men of Senſe and Worth. In ſhort there is not in any principle of Natural Religion, nor in any duty it recommends, any thing Wild or abſurd or fantaſtical or trifling; nothing, on the contrary but what is highly Rational, important, ſacred. How great then is the folly and madneſs and impiety of thoſe, who thus wantonly ſhoot arrows againſt Heaven, that muſt return upon their own heads; and who ſcatter firebrands and Death among Men, and ſay *Are we not in Sport?* Too much, 'tis to be feared, does the World abound even with this Sort of Men: But the other Claſs that falls under our Cenſure is perhaps yet more Numerous; which conſiſts of thoſe

WHO would be thought to be convinced of the Obligation, and to allow of the Duties of Natural Religion, but are declared Enemies to all Revealed, and ridicule the Belief of it upon every occaſion with all the malice of Wit. Now conſidering the great Antiquity that Revelation lays claim to, which in ſome inſtances, to give a probable account of things, muſt have been coæval with Mankind itſelf; together with the general

neral Belief of it, which however impaired has prevailed more or leſs in almoſt all places and ages; even This alone ſhould ſcreen it from any *inſolent abuſe* of thoſe who disbelieve it themſelves: And conſidering that Chriſtianity itſelf pleads a preſcription of ſeventeen hundred years, and is at this time the Eſtabliſhed Religion of our own Country, it ought at leaſt by thoſe who ſuſpect the grounds of it, to be examined with Candor, and to be proceeded againſt with Diſcretion and gentleneſs. For there is a decent regard due to the Religion of a Country, even tho' it ſhould prove an Erroneous one. To laugh at the Publick upon any account is to be wanting in that reſpect which is due to common Society; much greater is the inſolence when private Men venture to deride thoſe things which are the object of publick Veneration. Whoever therefore inſtead of refuting Errors by Reaſon and Temper, will treat in a contemptuous manner what carries with it to others a ſacred character, can only give Scandal where he ſhould endeavour at a Reformation, and muſt ſhew himſelf to be equally a ſtranger to good Senſe and to good Manners. And yet this is the favourite method of Infidelity. *Ridicule* is the vein that runs thro' the writings, and what ſeaſons the converſation of the Unbelievers of the Age. And then as much Triumph ariſes from having flung a bold Jeſt at Chriſtianity, as if they had actually overthrown it by mere dint of Reaſoning. The Antient Enemies of it, were no ſtrangers to this practiſe; and the Arts of thoſe have been revived

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and improved too in theſe latter days. The groſſeſt miſrepreſentations have receiv'd an edge from *Ridicule*, in order to make our Religion *deſpiſed*, that it might finally be *rejected* of Men. In order to this, Has not the Neceſſity, nay Expediency of Chriſtianity been ſcoffed at as a jeſt? Have not the ſtrong Evidence and Teſtimonies by which it is ſupported, all in their turns, been the ſubject of much Drollery and licentious Mirth? Has not almoſt every particular Doctrine of it been attack'd in the moſt ſcurrilous manner; and the ſacred Pages which contain thoſe Doctrines, been derided, vilified, exploded; and perverted by ludicrous quotations to every profane and impious purpoſe? And the better to compleat their deſign, have not Thoſe who by Chriſts own inſtitution, are more particularly appointed to teach and to defend his Religion, been the ſtanding Mark at which they inceſſantly ſhoot their ſharpeſt Arrows, even bitter Words? And has not their Satire againſt them been generally of that kind, which is of all others the moſt Scurrilous and illiberal?

I muſt here again beg leave to renew my Expoſtulation, and to enquire a little into the juſtifiableneſs of ſuch proceedings.

With regard to the *Foundation* of Chriſtianity, I would ask of them, whether there is any thing *Ridiculous* in ſuppoſing (what cannot well be denied.) That all Mankind had tranſgreſs'd the Original Law of God, whether it was Natural only, or alſo Revealed; and that they had conſequently involved themſelves in the guilt of ſin:

ſin: That God is a Being infinite in Juſtice as well as Mercy; and that, according to our Conceptions, it is as much the property of the One, before a reconciliation with offenders, to inſiſt upon ſome Atonement, as it is a token of the Other, graciouſly to accept it: That his Purity would likewiſe incline him to ſtigmatize Wickedneſs with the moſt flagrant marks of his diſpleaſure, that Righteouſneſs might be the more effectually eſtabliſhed: That accordingly he ſent his only begotten Son into the World, to take Human Nature upon him; and in that to be a Sacrifice and Propitiation for the ſins of the Whole World: That by an extraordinary Revelation, (communicated at a time when Ignorance and Vice had almoſt univerſally overſpread the face of the Earth, and when the footſteps of Religion could only be traced in the Ruins that Superſtition had wrought) He taught Mankind their duty in a more Perfect and Explicite manner, than it had ever been known before; that he fenced in his Laws with the moſt proper Sanctions; and promis'd us ſuch aſſiſtance for the fulfilling of them, concurrent with our own Endeavours, as the meer Natural Man muſt want, both as an Encouragement and as a Support. This is but an imperfect Sketch of the Chriſtian Scheme; but enough to diſcover that there is much in it, to excite our Adoration of the Divine goodneſs, but nothing to create our Mirth.

With regard to the *External Evidence* of this Religion, I would ask, whether (beſide the concurrence of other Teſtimony) the Completion of many Prophecies that went before concern-

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ing Chriſt, and the Miracles which he himſelf wrought, are not a ſufficient atteſtation of the truth of it. As this is too clear a point to be denied, allowing their Authority; I would ask concerning the *Prophecies*, whether in anſwer to all the Cavils brought againſt this kind of Proof, it has not been undeniably ſhewn by the Labours of the Learned, that they are truly of the Date they pretend to; that the Interpretations of them are conſiſtent and warrantable; and that the Jews, to whom they were more immediately directed, did all along apply them to the Meſſiah, altho' they muſt know that ſome of them had likewiſe a view to other Events: And whether they were not all in general fulfill'd by *Jeſus Chriſt* ſo minutely, as they never were nor could be by any body elſe. And in relation to the *Miracles* of our Saviour, which have been banter'd as Illuſion, or what is even leſs than that, as mere Allegories; it may likewiſe de demanded, whether they have not in general been proved to carry in them all the Genuine marks that it is poſſible for any true Miracle to have, and whether every One in particular has not been clearly vindicated from the imputation of ſome imaginary Incongruities with which they have been unreaſonably charged. If the oppoſers of Chriſtianity upon account of its Evidence, *have not* ſeriouſly taken into conſideration the arguments that have been brought in ſupport of it, it would be decent in them to ſuſpend their Wit till they have better informed their Judgement; and if they *have*, they ſhould *confute* before they *Ridicule*.

If we proceed to examine into the *intrinſick Value* of our Religion, Are the Doctrines of it a proper ſubject of Diriſion, which are beyond diſpute a better Syſtem of Morality, than is to be collected from the Wiſdom of Philoſophy ſcatter'd thro' all the writings of the world beſide? And if there are ſome few more ſpeculative ones (which may have their Moral Uſes too) relating to the Divine Eſſence and to the work of Mans Redemption, which may be attended with ſome difficulties inexplicable by human Underſtanding, Are they therefore to be rejected with Mockery; becauſe the whole Myſtery of Gods wonderful Diſpenſations is not laid open to our view; or becauſe we cannot comprehend the manner of an infinite Exiſtence, tho' we are abſolute ſtrangers to that of our own? Or is it fit that the Sacred books themſelves, the Repoſitory of theſe Doctrines, which are the Refuge, the Conſolation, and the Delight of every good Man, ſhould be trodden under foot and vilified and become a By-word to the Profane and the Scoffer? Or is it a ſufficient juſtification of ſuch uſage, becauſe Men will venture raſhly to pronounce upon them, without any one requiſite Qualification; or becauſe ſome particular Expreſſions and Paſſages in them occaſioned by the peculiarities of the Language, or of the manners and cuſtoms of a remote Age, give offence to thoſe, whoſe Extent of knowledge reaches only to Modern Notions and practiſes? Or laſtly is it at all becoming, that thoſe who by the appointment of Chriſt himſelf are the Guardians and Teachers of his Doctrines, ſhould upon that very

very account alone, be expoſed to Ridicule and Mockery, to Scurrility and Abuſe? But if That which ought to raiſe their Character tends only to depreciate it, and if the Scoffers are reſolved to deſpiſe all Men in their *hearts*, that have any peculiar relation to the Religion of Chriſt; yet other Conſiderations ſhould induce them to be more decent in their *behaviour*, and to put ſome reſtraint upon their *tongues*. Some motive to this it ſhould be to reflect, That the Clergy are under the common protection of the ſame Civil Government with themſelves, and have therefore a title to common civility even by virtue of the Laws of their Country: That they are Men of a Liberal Education, that they may be duly qualified for, and are ſequeſtr'd from every inconſiſtent Employment, that they may without interruption attend upon, the Services of Religion: That it is by no means matter of juſt Offence, that ſome alſo amongſt them, ſhould by their Station and Authority have a proper influence to guard the Intereſts of it: That they do in general diſcharge their Duty conſciencioufly and well; teaching the Religion of Chriſt in its primitive Purity; defending it by their Learning, of which perhaps no Body of Men in the world has a larger ſhare, and adorning it by the integrity of their Lives: That where ſome are Ignorant or Vicious, the reproach ſhould fall upon the Perſons culpable, and not upon the Order; but that They rather ſhould be counted worthy of double Honour, who have maintain'd the dignity of their Character, and preſerved it without ſpot or blemiſh. But this

Practiſe, however reaſonable in itſelf, is not to be expected from the Scoffers: For as Decency is nearly allied to Virtue, we ſhall find the Enemies of the One to be generally as much Strangers to the Other. Leaving them therefore to their own Conduct

III. It remains only in the laſt place, to recommend briefly ſome means of beſt ſecuring Our Religion and Ourſelves againſt the Attacks that may come from this Quarter.

1. The *firſt* thing neceſſary for this purpoſe, is a thorough Knowledge of the Grounds and Principles of our Religion. When we know the Reaſon of the Hope that is in us, it then becomes an Anchor of the Soul both ſure and ſtedfaſt; which will hinder us from fluctuating amidſt a diverſity of unſettled Opinions, and will keep us firm and immoveable againſt all the overflowings of Infidelity. Conviction ariſing from an inſight into Truth, will inſpirit us in every conflict; and will be a defence to us againſt the Craft of Sophiſtry and the ſting of *Ridicule*. Secure in the ſtrength of a Rational belief, the Enemy can have no advantage over us, nor the wicked approach to hurt us. But if we Profeſs to teach a Religion that we have only taken upon truſt, as our Notions concerning it will be Erroneous, ſo our Inſtructions will miſrepreſent it, and our Defences betray it. An injurious Expoſition or an injudicious Vindication, will ruin the beſt of Cauſes, and lay the Author of them open to certain mockery and contempt. How careful therefore ſhould we be,

to furniſh ourſelves by proper application with all neceſſary and uſeful knowledge for the ſervice of Religion, leſt peradventure we be found to fight againſt God, even out of a Zeal for his honour!

2. The *ſecond* thing requiſite for our Security in the Caſe before mention'd is Courage and Conſtancy in our perſuaſion, or in the Apoſtles Phraſe, *Boldneſs in the Faith.* Our firſt buſineſs ſhould be to be well acquainted with the Truth, the next to hold it faſt. If we cannot withſtand a little banter and *Ridicule* when we have Chriſt himſelf on our ſide, how ſcandalous muſt be our retreat, and how vigorouſly muſt we expect the Advantage to be purſued! We give a Satirical Enemy great opportunities of triumph, when we give ground ever ſo little thro' fear, irreſolution or ſhame. And well may the great Captain of our Salvation diſown ſuch ſervice as withdraws itſelf upon being laught at only, when He inſiſts upon the fidelity of it, even in the fiery trial of Perſecution. Hear, and tremble at the conſequence of ſuch a baſe deſertion. *Whoſoever ſhall be aſhamed of me and of my words in this Adulterous and ſinful generation, of him alſo ſhall the Son of Man be aſhamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy Angels.* Mark 8. 38. But if we have Boldneſs in *him*, we ſhall find it, to be our Security here, as well as our Confidence (when we moſt ſhall want it) in the day of Judgement.

3. A *third* thing which may be a Defence to us againſt the Scoffers is that truly Chriſtian temper, a Spirit of Meekneſs. For a Reſolution

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to defend our Religion, and an inoffenſive manner of doing it, are by no means inconſiſtent. This behaviour is not only in itſelf becoming, but it is enjoyned us. It is our Saviours own expreſs command, *Learn of me for I am meek and lowly in heart:* Mat. 11. 29. and it is part of his Character, that when he was reviled he reviled not again. The Religion of Chriſt will allow of no Arts in its defence or recommendation, that are not perfectly conformable to its Rules. And this Conduct may be particularly uſeful in blunting thoſe arrows that are directed againſt Ourſelves; as skillful Contenders will oft-times beſt elude the force of a blow by not bearing up too raſhly againſt it, and yet at the ſame time can reſoluetly maintain their ground. This likewiſe is the moſt probable method of diſarming our Adverſaries themſelves; who muſt by this means, if by any, be won over to a decent behaviour, when they ſee that all their Calumny and ſpite and abuſe cannot provoke us to a return of ill uſage; but that our only aim is, by all gentle Arguments of Perſuaſion, to reduce them from Error to the acknowledgement of the Truth. It is in ſhort, the Duty of a Chriſtian, not to be overcome of evil: and it is no leſs his Duty, to evercome evil with good.

4. The *laſt* thing I ſhall mention, neceſſary for the Security of our Religion, and of ourſelves, againſt the Scoffers is Holineſs of Life. As unreaſonable a thing as it is, to make Chriſtianity accountable for that wickedneſs which it utterly condemns, yet we may obſerve that the deepeſt and moſt incurable Wounds are given

it thro' thoſe, who diſhonour it more by profeſſing, than they could injure by denying it. Truth, however bright in itſelf, may yet be obſcured, and loſe much of its native ſplendor in the Eyes of Men, by the foulneſs of the Medium thro' which it is view'd. Such will be the influence of the Life of a wicked Chriſtian; who is both a Scandal to himſelf, and a Reproach to his profeſſion. But a virtuous and holy Converſation is the Ornament and Defence of both. It renders Religion graceful and amiable to Mankind; and Eſteem and Affection ariſing from thence, will beſt guard it from every abuſe. But if it ſhould at any time fall under Contempt and *Ridicule*, yet an Exemplary Chriſtian will be able to reply with a good grace to the Scorner, when his own Life is a vindication of his Cauſe, not his Cauſe, as it too often happens, a Condemnation of himſelf. And what better Support againſt *particular* abuſe can a good Man wiſh for, than a Conſciouſneſs of ſharing the ſame fate with Religion itſelf? Or can he be diſmayed in ſuffering for the ſake of it, when *That* alſo bears a part with *him* in the unjuſt reproach that *He* ſuſtains? A Religious Man muſt be ill-treated by an irreligious World: But let this be his Confidence, that the Scene will ſoon be changed. Honour and Glory and Immortality will be *his* portion, while inſupportable ſhame and confuſion ſhall overwhelm the Scoffers. For *then ſhall the Righteous Man ſtand in great boldneſs before the face of Such as have afflicted him, and made no account of his Labours. When they ſee it, they ſhall be troubled with terrible fear, and ſhall be amazed*

amazed at the ſtrangeneſs of his Salvation ſo far beyond all that they looked for. And they repenting and groaning for anguiſh of ſpirit, ſhall ſay within themſelves, This was he, whom we had ſometimes in Deriſion, and a Proverb of reproach. We fools counted his Life Madneſs, and his End to be without honour; How is he number'd with the Children of God, and his Lot is among the Saints! Wiſd. 5. 1–5.

the children of god and his lot is among the saints

FINIS.

to be without honour how is he number with the child of god and his lot is am the saints wisd

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